DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 918 EC 307 592

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TITLE	Gifted Education: Don't Overlook the Disadvantaged.
PUB DATE	1999-11-15
NOTE	21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Point Clear, AL, November 17-19, 1999).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Ability Identification; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; Data Interpretation; *Economically Disadvantaged; *Gifted; Incidence; Low Income Groups; Middle Schools; *Rural Schools; Statistical Analysis; *Student Characteristics; Surveys; *Talent; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	Kentucky

ABSTRACT

This study provides a descriptive statistical analysis of the incidence of students who participate in the federal free/reduced lunch program and who are identified for a gifted education program at three Kentucky middle schools. There are 2,000 students enrolled in the three schools and the free/reduced lunch incidence varies from 60 percent to 80 percent. A description of provisions for identification of economically disadvantaged students is also provided. Twenty-one regular class teachers from the three schools received professional development training in the identification of and educational planning for gifted and talented students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The training used a model developed by Howard Spicker that emphasizes identifying characteristics for rural disadvantaged gifted children. The model contrasts these students with the more typical urban middle class child who displays skills and abilities that teachers automatically recognize as gifted. Results from a post-training survey indicate that teachers felt their ability to identify culturally diverse and low-socioeconomic gifted and talented students had improved after professional development training and activities on identification procedures. (Contains 51 references.) (CR)

Gifted Education: Don't Overlook the Disadvantaged

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1999

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Point Clear, AL, November, 1999

Abstract

Gifted Education: Don't Overlook the Disadvantaged

It is often difficult to distinguish between truly gifted children and children whose background has been so enriched that they score extremely well on norm-referenced tests. On the other hand, students who come from economically and educationally disadvantaged families have often never had a book read to them, have not had developmentally appropriate and enriching materials to play with, and many have never been out of the county of residence. Every year students begin school who have never seen an elevator, never eaten in a restaurant (even McDonald's), and never been to a library or zoo. These students come to school ready and eager to learn but behind their peers in life experiences. It is often very difficult to identify the gifted children from this background. It is well documented that affluent white students are more likely to be enrolled in a gifted program than minority or disadvantaged children. There is a need to establish a method of identifying economically disadvantaged gifted students which does not penalize them due to poor performance on standardized norm-referenced tests. Performance-based assessment techniques may be preferable to standardized testing for identification of economically disadvantaged students.

The present study provides a descriptive statistical analysis of the incidence of students who participate in the federal free/reduced lunch program who are identified for a gifted education program at three Kentucky middle schools. There are 2000 students

enrolled in the three schools and the free/reduced lunch incidence varies from 60% to 80%. A description is also provided for identification procedures at the three schools with particular attention to provisions for identification of economically disadvantaged students.

Gifted Education: Don't Overlook the Disadvantaged

Introduction.

In the America 2000 document (1989), developed by the President of the United States and the Governors of all 50 states, it is stated that by the year 2000:

- "...every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
- students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.

and that

- every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship."

These goals stress the need for excellence (first in the world in math and science) and the need for increasing ability to compete in economic and international technological arenas. Gifted students can only learn to use their minds well, be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement, and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy if they are challenged to excel.

Separate vs. combined programs for gifted education.

The provision of services to gifted students has traditionally been along a continuum from full-time regular class placement with same age peers and no special programming to total segregation of gifted students from the mainstream student population. The two most common types of programming are pull-out and in-class models. A pull-out model has the student enrolled in a regular classroom for most of the

time. The student is pulled out to a gifted class on a daily or weekly basis. A drawback to pull-out programs is that fragmentation often occurs (Vaughn, Feldhusen, & Asher, 1991; Rogers, 1998). In-class models usually have same age students grouped by age and mixed heterogeneously for ability, relying heavily on cooperative learning group theory. Adaptations are made to the curriculum to allow the gifted students to perform alternative and sometimes additional learning activities in the regular classroom full time.

There is currently a great debate in the professional literature about which of these two models are more appropriate for the delivery of services to gifted students (Kulick, 1991; Kulick & Kulick, 1982; Kulick & Kulick, 1987; Kulick & Kulick, 1990; Lynch & Mills, 1990; Mills & Durden, 1992; Rogers, 1998; Slavin, 1987a; Slavin, 1987b; Slavin, 1988a; Slavin, 1988b; Slavin, 1990; Slavin, 1991; Slavin, Leavey, & Madden, 1984; Winner, 1998). A review of this literature seems to indicate that it is important for gifted students to have the best of both worlds. Gifted students need to be a part of a regular classroom where they are in cooperative learning groups interacting with children of all ability levels using an integrated curriculum (Slavin, ibid.). Gallagher (1991) agrees and states that cooperative learning methods are well suited to the changing needs of the American workplace and to accomplish the goals of America 2000.

However, gifted students also appear to benefit from pull-out programs where they have an opportunity to be with intellectual peers and make rapid progress in specific academic skills (Kulick & Kulick, 1984.; Vaughn, et. al, 1991). The proponents of pull-out and ability grouped classes have found that it is advantageous for gifted students to have an opportunity to learn with other gifted students (Kulick, 1991; Kulick & Kulick, 1987; Kulick & Kulick, 1990; Mills & Durden, 1992). Gifted students need an

opportunity to be with other gifted students to develop a sense of belongingness and self-esteem (Vaughn, et. al, 1991) and need help in acknowledging that they are gifted and what this implies for them as learners (Marshall, 1998; Mills & Durden, 1992; Spicker, Southern, & Davis, 1987). They can do this by talking to other gifted students who have had similar life and school experiences, thereby beginning to feel comfortable with their giftedness.

Identification of students as gifted.

A problem with gifted education, regardless of the format of program delivery, is the identification of which students are to be selected as gifted. It is well documented that affluent white students are more likely to be enrolled in gifted programs than minority or disadvantaged children. Affluent white students consistently score higher on traditional norm-referenced tests that are often used to make gifted education placement decisions (Barstow & Baldwin, 1988). Gifted economically disadvantaged students represent an untapped potential for excellence in school systems across the nation (Maker, 1989; Patton, Prillaman, & VanTassel-Baska, 1990; Richert, 1987). There is a need to establish a method of identifying economically disadvantaged gifted students that does not penalize them due to poor performance on standardized norm-referenced tests.

Wiggins (1989), Resnick (1990), and Renzulli and Purcell (1996) have suggested that performance-based assessments are more authentic than standardized test data. Students work alone or in small groups on real life projects that require problem solving and higher level thinking skills. Students are required to conduct original research and apply it to meaningful problems. The performance data is gathered over a period of time

and represents what a student is capable of producing when performance criteria are clearly explained and taught.

Examples of performance-based assessment techniques are: portfolios of student work, writing journals, and student performance projects. Another approach to identifying economically disadvantaged gifted children is surveys. Surveys and/or interviews with parents help identify gifted students because parents are often more accurate than the schools in identifying gifted children, particularly young gifted children (Louis & Lewis, 1992). Student surveys can be effectively used to elicit peer nominations to determine who the children in the class believe to be gifted (Banbury & Wellington, 1989; Gagne, 1989).

Economically and educationally disadvantaged students often have parents who are not educationally adept. The parents have not been very successful in school themselves and do not know how to help their child learn the teacher's expectations for classroom performance. For example, many of the parents of disadvantaged students have never conducted a research project on insects and would have no idea how to help their eight year old child use the library to research the topic, conduct an experiment, and write a paper on such a project. Well-educated parents, who have learned what is expected within the educational system, can help their child perform at high levels by teaching their child the "secrets" of educational success. Performance-based assessment, if conducted correctly, instructs all students in the criteria by which they will be judged and the standards for excellence. All students, educationally disadvantaged or enriched, then know the rules of the assessment game and have the opportunity of equal footing. Alternatives to traditional testing appear essential to

identify students who do not perform well on standardized tests (Chapman, 1988; Mitchell, 1988; Richert, Alvino, & McDonnel, 1982; Skuy, Gaydon, Hoffenberg, & Fridjhon, 1990; Spicker, et. al, 1987).

It is often difficult to distinguish between truly gifted children and children whose background has been so enriched that they score extremely well on norm-referenced tests (but are actually in the bright-average range of intelligence). On the other hand, students who come from economically and educationally disadvantaged families have often never had a book read to them, have not had developmentally appropriate and enriching materials to play with, and many have never been out of the county of residence. Every year students begin school who have never seen an elevator, never eaten in a restaurant (even McDonald's), and never been to a library or zoo. These students come to school ready and eager to learn, but behind their peers in life experiences. It is often very difficult to identify the gifted children from this background. They do not come to school already knowing how to read, and typically do not do well on standardized tests (Baldwin, 1987; Gardner, 1983). This results in two possible conclusions:

1. Low socio-economic status (SES) students are not as smart as middle or upper SES students.
2. Gifted education identification processes discriminate against economically disadvantaged students.

The first conclusion is unthinkable and not supported by research which indicates that giftedness is evenly distributed across race, gender, and ethnic groups (Eby & Smutney, 1990). Are we to believe that giftedness is not evenly distributed across socioeconomic

status? The second conclusion is more palatable, but has profound implications for research and more importantly, for practice.

Gifted primary education.

Primary teachers need to develop an atmosphere in each class where giftedness can emerge (Richert, 1987). This is particularly important for the disadvantaged gifted students because appropriate programming impacts drop-out rates and future college enrollment of minority students (Smith, LeRose, & Clasen, 1991). The early years are crucial to the formation of attitudes toward learning, perceptions of competence, and development of intrinsic motivation in gifted students (Renzulli, 1991).

Gifted children have the capability to learn at a greater depth and rate than their same age peers (Parke & Ness, 1988; Renzulli & Reis, 1998). Therefore, programming for the gifted needs to allow students to progress at their own rate. Since the primary program, by design,

consists of multi-age heterogeneous classes, it is assumed that there will be a wide variety of ability levels both within and across age groups. A recurring problem is that gifted students' needs too often are placed last because it is assumed that they will succeed with no special provisions and students with learning difficulties are competing for the primary teacher's time.

Elkind (1986, 1989) has emphasized that we are putting too much emphasis on learning the wrong kind of information too soon, making education a race. Elkind has emphasized that learning environments need to be created which encourage children to feel good about themselves as a consequence of their achievement and choices, rather than through their response to adult direction, which reinforces dependence on others.

This can be accomplished through the use of developmentally appropriate practices in a gifted program at the primary level.

Guidelines from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1985) should be used as the guiding philosophy for the development of primary programs, including primary programs which incorporate gifted students. An integrated curriculum should be developed with an emphasis on hands-on activities, decision-making, problem-solving, and basic learning strategies to become independent learners. Teachers need to work to develop a balance in the curriculum between teacher-directed and student-initiated activities. One of the goals of education is to encourage students to become lifelong learners by teaching them to take responsibility for their learning and becoming part of the process of curricular decision making (Parke & Ness, 1988; Treffinger, 1991).

Most primary classroom teachers have not had any staff development on gifted education and grossly under-identify and under-serve gifted students. The educationally and economically disadvantaged students are rarely noticed by teachers as possibly being gifted and needing specially designed educational practices to develop their specific skills and talents. Teachers who have not received intensive staff development most often identify "teacher-pleasers" as students capable of and needing their encouragement and instruction to excel. These teacher pleasers are most often bright average children from educationally enriched backgrounds who find learning easy and are motivated to try to do well on teacher-assigned tasks. They are often not truly gifted, and students who do not meet this stereotype are often overlooked (Biehler, 1992; Davis & Rimm, 1985). As a result, the disadvantaged gifted students often do

not receive any gifted education services as a primary student. This often leads to non-identification at the upper grade levels because standardized tests are typically used for identification at these levels, and disadvantaged students do not typically do well on this type of test (Barstow & Baldwin, 1988; Biehler, 1992; Gardner, 1983). In order to facilitate effective teacher referrals, teachers need to be taught to look at a range of information about individual students (Guskin, Peng, & Simon, 1992).

When one aspect of a program in the classroom is improved, there is a general overall improvement in the total school program (Olenchak & Renzulli, 1989). Karnes & Johnson (1987) found that when they improved one aspect of the Head Start program, the entire program was upgraded. They focused on identifying potentially gifted children who were provided a program which emphasized higher-level thinking. As a result, both identified gifted and non-identified students made significant gains over comparison groups who did not receive the instruction. This study has an implication for disadvantaged students who may not be formally identified, but are able to reap the benefits of an improved primary program. This will help address the inequity in educational resources which often exists between affluent and economically disadvantaged gifted students.

In summary, the America 2000 plan mandated both excellence and equity in education. The current situation of under-identification of disadvantaged students for gifted programs provides neither excellence nor equity. Eby and Smutny (1990) assert that giftedness is randomly distributed across race, gender, and ethnic groups. Therefore, identification systems must be developed to identify students representative of the disadvantaged subgroup in the proportion to their numbers in the total school

population. If any students need gifted programs, disadvantaged students need them the most (Richert, et. al, 1982).

Method

Participants

Participants were 21 regular class teachers from three middle schools in Kentucky who have received professional development training in the identification of and educational planning for gifted and talented students with special emphasis on economically disadvantaged and educationally underachieving students.

Materials

The survey consists of a series of questions about the school population, school demographics, the identification procedure for students for a gifted and talented program, and the effects of the staff development program that has been implemented.

Procedure

The gifted and talented education coordinator at each of the three schools was contacted to get basic demographic information about the school and to serve as the liaison to administer and return the survey instruments. For the purposes of the present research, qualification for the federal free or reduced lunch program is considered evidence of low socio-economic level.

Results

Table 1 outlines the results of the inquiry about the percent of students in the school on free or reduced lunch versus the number of students identified for the gifted and talented program who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Qualification for free or reduced lunch is being used as the indicator of economic disadvantage.

	Student enrollment	% students of free/reduced lunch	% students in GT on free/reduced lunch
School 1	367	53%	33%
School 2	368	84%	65%
School 3	387	80%	40%

Survey results indicated that teachers felt their ability to identify culturally diverse and low-socioeconomic gifted and talented students had improved after professional development training and activities on identification procedures (see Table 2).

To what extent have staff development activities influenced your attitudes toward identification of gifted/talented students?	Not at all 10%	Slightly 33%	Moderately 19%	Significantly 38%
To what extent have staff development activities influenced your attitudes toward identification of culturally diverse students?	Not at all 5%	Slightly 52%	Moderately 33%	Significantly 10%
To what extent have staff development activities influenced your attitudes toward identification of students from low-socioeconomic status environments?	Not at all 14%	Slightly 33%	Moderately 19%	Significantly 33%
The identification procedure in my school correctly identifies gifted and talented students from my class.	Strongly disagree 10%	Disagree 38%	Agree 29%	Strongly agree 14%
The identification procedure in my school misidentifies gifted and talented students from my class.	Strongly disagree 5%	Disagree 19%	Agree 38%	Strongly agree 19%
Culturally or educationally disadvantaged students are often not identified for the gifted and talented program?	Strongly disagree 10%	Disagree 38%	Agree 19%	Strongly agree 19%

Additionally, in response to an open question asking for an example of how their attitudes had been influenced by the professional development that has been provided, one respondent answered "...I also realize we are missing (in the identification process) disadvantaged and especially underachieving students with high potential."

Summary and Conclusions

The present results are consistent with findings of other research that economically disadvantaged students are under-identified for gifted and talented programs. However, the findings of the survey indicate that teachers who have received specific training in the identification of these hard to identify populations believe they are better able to identify these students after detailed training. The training program being used by the three schools is in the process of being developed by the lead school in the project. This school received a Jacob Javits gifted and talented grant with the specific purpose of developing a model program and identification procedure for use in a rural school district with high percentages of economically disadvantaged and under achieving students. The training on identification follows a model developed by Howard Spicker (1992) that emphasizes identification of rural gifted youth. He has developed a list of identifying characteristics for rural disadvantaged gifted children that contrasts the students with the more typical urban middle class child who displays skills and abilities that teachers automatically recognize as gifted, i.e. speaking standard English, having good verbal and written communication skills, active participation in class, high performance on standardized tests, and well-done classroom and homework assignments. Disadvantaged rural gifted students, on the other hand, often speak in a non-standard English regional dialect, may have good content but poor quality in writing

mechanics, may be passive in class and lax in completing homework assignments, and are likely to not do well on standardized tests (Spicker, 1992).

This project is in the initial stages of a three year cycle and will be used to follow changes in identification procedures in the participating schools. The end result should be an increase in the proportion of students in the gifted/talented program who are economically disadvantaged.

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